DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 202 276 HE 013 783

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TITLE Definitions of Quality.
INSTITUTION Education Commission of the States, Denver, Colo. Inservice Education Program.; State Higher Education Executive Officers Association.
SPONS AGENCY Kellogg Foundation, Battle Creek, Mich.
REPORT NO IEP-041
PUB DATE Jul 80
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at a Seminar for State Leaders in Postsecondary Education (San Antonio, TX, July 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Achievement; *Achievement Need; *Aspiration; Definitions; Individual Development; Individual Needs; *Performance; *Quality of Life; Self Actualization
IDENTIFIERS *Seminars for State Leaders Postsec Ed (ECS SHEEO)

ABSTRACT

A parable that addresses the issue of defining quality is presented. Among the lessons are the ideas that one needs to consider a specific quality rather than a broad use of the term, and that quality or excellence is not necessarily linked to originality, hard labor, size, common opinion, or expert opinion. It is suggested that in a free society there exists the freedom to be excellent or less than excellent, and that in a community, the mark of excellence is the mutual commitment to individual excellence in its members. However, the ultimate accountability is to oneself. What otherwise passes for excellence is most often an imposed and proximate excellence defined by others. It is questionable that a society can be excellent if it prizes efficiency more highly than it does excellence, and social orderliness more highly than individual development. Layers of routines and rules smother the individual excellences of those expected to produce the society's excellence. A free society needs to seek ways to encourage its individuals to define and desire their own excellences. (SW)

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ED202276

Inservice Education Program (IEP)

Paper Presented at a Seminar for State Leaders in Postsecondary Education

DEFINITIONS OF QUALITY

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IEP Paper No. 041

HE013783

Education Commission of the States

Inservice Education Program (IEP)
Education Commission of the States
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The IEP Program has been supported primarily by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation with additional funds from the Education Commission of the States, the Frost Foundation and the State Higher Education Executive Officers

DEFINITIONS OF QUALITY

Deep in the mud of a fever-infested swamp on the East Coast, in a place once known as Foggy Bottom, an earthenware urn was recently unearthed. It contained what appeared to be relics and artifacts of an earlier civilization, one in which the people seemed to have made everything by hand. There was an iron skillet still full of cornbread "made from scratch", a walrus tusk carved with delicate scrim-shaw designs of smiling men and women raising a barn together, a cross-stitch sampler that read "To Soar With Eagles, Don't Flock With Turkeys", and some hand-sewn doll's clothes, obviously from a pre-Barbie era since they lacked space for ample bosoms. There was also a rolled parchment scroll that oddly was sealed with red tape rather than sealing wax.

The scroll, when opened and read, was almost scriptural in tone, and some of the passages from this apocryphal document are pertinent to the theme of this opening panel: "Defining and Assessing Quality." As the first speaker of the day on a long day of speeches, it seemed proper for me to bring you, instead of a lecture, a morning devotional, by reading from these parchment precepts of unknown origin. Here beginneth the lesson:

Now as they were husking corn, his followers fell to fighting among themselves, and they came to him, saying, "Master, some say quality cannot be defined, and others that it can be recognized but not measured, and others that it can be both defined and assessed. Whom among us is right?"

He answered them, saying, "O follish misusers of words. There is no quality in the word quality. It is a word of no value. Unless one speaks of some specific quality, quality is a clanging cymbal. All things have qualities,

such as qualities of heat, color, or size, and within each quality there are degrees of quality. When you quarrel over quality, you are probably debating the quality known as excellence, that which the Greeks called 'Arete", meaning the aspect of goodness in an object.

"Behold, then, I show you a mystery. All things that are, are both excellent and not excellent. There is no child more beautiful to a mother than her own, but that same child may be to an unwed father an ugly reminder of undesired responsibility and irresponsible desire. Yet, truly, though both mother and father see their child differently, both see it better than one who had no part in its birth or growth."

Then they asked, "Say you then that excellence, like the child, is in being unique by being the only one of its kind?"

He answered, "In Japan is a factory that produces original artwork for Holy Day Inns. One person paints blue backgrounds, the next clouds, the next seagulls, another docks, and the last ships. Now each painting is an original unlike any other in some detail, but is it therefore excellent?"

Shaking their heads, they said, "Perhaps hard work is what makes a thing excellent, such as the labor of the mother bearing the child or the toil of a solitary artist producing a masterpiece."

But he replied, "Did not the slaves who built the great pyramids in the deserts of Egypt toil? They worked as horses and died like flies. But in their slavery and from their early graves, would they think the pyramids they built excellent?"

Nodding, they answered him, saying, "But perhaps the excellence in the pyramids is in their size, as in the size of the Grand Canyon or Niagra Falls or the universe, or in budgets or bureaucracies or populations."

In turn he answered them, by asking, "Is there not as much excellence at the end of the microscope as at the end of the telescope? Have you not seen

excellence in hummingbirds or a human cell or a raindrop?"

"Then surely," they said, "you must mean that excellence is in the eye of the beholders, in some common opinion held by many people about a thing's excellence."

But he laughed at them, saying, "Is not the common opinion of what is best how we choose those leaders who infest this swamp? Verily, verily, that which is common is by definition that which is average, and what is average cannot at the same moment be above average, or excellent. The largest carriagemaker company of our society has a mannikin it calls the Average Man, and no carriage may be built which does not allow its Average Man prescribed leg and head room. Yet, no one is average. We are tall, short, fat, thin, blind, limbless, but none of us is average. The idea of "the greatest good for the greatest number" is an excellent theory for a government, but it does not necessarily produce excellence in the individual works of individual citizens."

Despairing, they answered, "Then obviously excellence is a thing only experts can produce or recognize, and most of us will never know if we have produced it except some outside expert judge our works and praise them."

But he said, "There were in the same city, two mental institutions. One rehabilitated five percent of its patients and the other fifty-five percent. The city's officials, unable to fund both, asked an expert in mental illnesses which institution was the best. He chose the one with fifty-five percent success."

"And rightly so," they all agreed.

"Not rightly so," he said. "The one with fifty-five percent success had only a hundred patients, none of whom were considered incurable when they were tested for admission. But the one with only five percent success had

five thousand patients and accepted anyone sent to it, without examination."

Now deeply distressed, his followers asked in exasperation, "Where, then, can excellence lie, if not in originality, nor in hard labor, nor in size, nor in the common opinion, nor in expert opinion? Is excellence always a pretext rather than a reality? Are there no standards of excellence?"

Smiling sadly, he arose from the log on which he had sat and mounted a stump above them, and he taught them, saying, "In a tyrannical society, you cannot know excellence, because you have surrendered to your rulers the remote-control right to define it, and the right to demand it or not of you as they choose, and the right to assess it.

"But let us assume that a free society is more excellent than a tyranny, and that it is possible for a free society to be orderly without being tyrannical. In a free society, whoever or whatever gives you freedom also gives you, at the same time, the freedom to be excellent or less than excellent. What rulers forget too easily is that the most definitive definition of excellence, the most valid evaluation of excellence, and the most excellent form of excellence is a person's own, unless a person is not free. The kingdom of excellence is within you. What you are and what you produce speak out from within you, and all that others see of that is an external facade. When an external facade is mistaken for an internal essence, then the internal voice of excellence is muffled or muzzled.

"In a free society, excellence must be a free enterprise, else it is but a shadow of excellence. That does not mean the uncooperative and cut-throat individualism of anarchy is excellent, but it does mean that you, more than anyone else, must be the creator and caretaker of your own excellence, and you must be your own harshest judge and your own most patient redeemer. Who else knows better than you how short you fall of perfection, and for what causes?

To whom do you answer most and still remain free, if not to yourself? What trust is it to be entrusted with producing excellence if you are not trusted to define it and to judge it and to repair it? What excellence is it to stand high in the eyes of others but low in your own eyes?

"It is irrational, but true, that as a society becomes more rational, excellence wanes, because the growing layers of routines and rules and regulations and rulers in a rationalized society smother the individual excellences of those still expected to produce the society's excellence. How can a society that prizes efficiency more highly than it does excellence, and social orderliness more highly than individual development, be excellent?

"The warmest fires of excellence burn on one's own hearth, and when many such home fires are kept burning, there can be excellence in the world. Otherwise, excellence is counterfeit and chilling, because it is copied rather than created, is concocted by others' formulas and recipes rather than by one's own experiment and discovery, and is given by the self out of deference to the powers of others rather than out of the self demanding power of itself.

"If you would create excellence, you must first learn to love yourself and then learn to love your work and the place where you live and work and the people with whom you live and work. Love is the first requisite of excellence, and out of it comes the second, like unto it, which is conscience. Then, conscience guides you towards integrity and motivates you towards excellence. The spark of loving, conscience-driven integrity ignites the latent excellence within you. In the light of its flame, you may find others like you, or draw others to you, and then there may arise a larger flame, called a community, in a family or in a field or in a shop, wherever two or more excellence-seekers gather together.

"The mark of excellence in a community will be the daily resurrection

of its mutual commitment to individual excellences in its members. They will daily unite in sharing the daily bread of their individual visions and in forgiving each other their daily trespasses upon one another's excellence.

"But even there, with hands joined and in close communion with like spirits, your ultimate accountability is still to yourself. Excellence is best when it is grown like renewable crops within yourself rather than when it is extracted from the non-renewable resources within you by the stripmining remote controls of others. Those outside yourself can give your excellence no more than external, part-time, and objective, unemotional attention, but your excellence requires internal, full-time, and subjective, impassioned attention.

"But what if, in being more accountable to yourself than to others, you discover you are of no account? Self-accountability has been too rare in our world for us to know if it will work. Freedom in our world is still so new that we do not know yet if it can exist. But we do know that if we are not accountable to ourselves, we are not free, and we do know that: but judge not ourselves, we will be judged nontheless. The self has good reason for fearing its being controlled by others, if history teaches us anything at all. True excellence arises from individuals, not from the remote control of individuals. What otherwise passes for excellence is most often an imposed and proximate excellence defined by others.

"In a free society, a greater goal to seek than 'Management-by-Objective' would be 'Management by Subjective', for ultimately a free society stays free by seeking ways to get its individuals to define and desire their own excellences. The less attention given to developing individual excellences and the more given to imposing someone else's idea of excellence upon individuals, the further that society drifts from the very freedom which was its original excellence. Spending time and money nurturing individual excellences may result

in a slower pace and less efficiency for the whole society, but that in itself may be an excellence. The demolition of any one's individual excellence diminishes you, but the enhancement of any one's excellence exalts you. The great challenge is to keep the ringing of the community bells from schoolhouses, courthouses, churches, and factories from sounding like the death knells of individual excellence. He who is excellent will be he who lives beyond himself, in the next concentric circle beyond the one most comfortable to him."

And having thus spoken, he put on his rusting armor and mounted his sagging horse and rode off--towards a windmill thrashing its arms against the horizon's rising sun of a new day.